

JAPANESE NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATIONS: THE INSTITUTIONAL REALIZATION OF *CHIEN*

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INTRODUCTION

One day in early summer 1991, in a small commercial area surrounding the train station I use, I noticed a sign board on the door of a building that called for new members to the local *jichi-kai* (a neighborhood association). The sign read:

... Our neighborhood association is similar to a friendly society. Its organization is comparable to "the air." Although its existence is not apparent in everyday life, in the event of an emergency the neighborhood association will be a help to you in some way. Members are promptly informed of local events and administration, and receive without delay notices from the ward and the Metropolis offices, which are difficult to be heeded otherwise. Members can also consult with *minsei iin* (a social welfare agent) and officers of the association about hygiene problems, funerals, and the like. Since we are living in the same neighborhood, please join and benefit from our association. The dues are 100 yen per month, or 1,200 yen per year.

I was a bit surprised to find that degree of enthusiasm for a neighborhood association among the residents of such an urban area as Tokyo, especially where I lived. It is one of the many residential areas that came into existence as the population of Tokyo grew, and white-collar workers, less traditionally oriented than the residents of the old section of Tokyo, make up a large portion of the population. As in any newly formed town, the residents seemed aloof from each other. A *jichi-kai* was something least imagined in such a neighborhood because I

thought it presupposed close-knit, day-to-day relationships among neighbors. Although the act of putting up the sign for new members is itself an indication of the indifference of the local people toward *jichi-kai*, still it was significant that there were a number of people concerned with the perpetuation of their association.

Living in the same community and being neighbors has a special meaning in Japanese society as indicated by the fact that *jichi-kai* is commonly found all over Japan even though its weight in the life of a community might vary from one place to another. The present study will discuss the significance of *jichi-kai* in the life of Japanese people, and further examine the term *chien*, which I consider a key concept for understanding Japanese society. *Chien*, whose literal meaning is a social relationship based on living in the same locality, is a cultural value which accords *jichi-kai* social importance. *Jichi-kai* can be regarded as the institutional realization of *chien*.

In the following, I will first discuss the history and general features of *jichi-kai*, and then present the case of Ayabe, a town on Tanba Heights, where the *jichi-kai* network covers the entire area and plays a significant role both in the local administration and in the lives of the residents.

HISTORY

Neighborhood associations before and during World War II reveal difference in their purpose and organization. Before World War II, they were formed spontaneously in order to respond to the needs which arose from communal life. They were particularly visible in agricultural and commercial areas where a great deal of cooperative work was required for production and trade. As far as Tokyo is concerned, the number of neighborhood associations increased significantly after an earthquake devastated the city in 1923. These neighborhood associations were one of the means to cope with the disaster. (Aoi et al. 1987: 14-15)

In the course of the war, the neighborhood association was incorporated into the wartime campaign, and its function and organization

shifted drastically. The war was a prime force in shaping the *jichi-kai* into its present form. In 1940 the government required that all neighborhoods throughout Japan form associations (the Home Ministry Ordinance No. 17). A household was the unit of membership, and *tonari-gumi* (several neighboring households organized in one group) was compulsory as a substructure of the association. Then, with the formation of Taisei Yokusan-kai (October 1940) the neighborhood associations were consolidated into a nationally centralized system. The Tasei Yokusan-kai was formed in order to place all the political, social and economic organizations under the control of the wartime government. The rearrangement of the neighborhood associations for that political purpose worked to standardize the local organizations that had been formed spontaneously, and had thus taken diverse forms. The neighborhood association was transformed into a unit of an efficient top-down communication system through which the nationalistic government imposed ideological conformity, mobilized the citizens for military purposes, and regulated the national economy.

In 1947 the Allied Powers who occupied Japan directed the government to abolish the neighborhood associations. They perceived the significant role these associations had played in the government's wartime campaigns. Shortly after, all upper-level officials of the neighborhood associations were barred for four years from holding any municipal office that had responsibilities similar to their former duties in the associations. Thus, the Japanese government attempted to prevent the reestablishment of the associations under new guises.

Despite these governmental policies, however, neighborhood associations did not disappear. Though given different names, they remained active in 86 percent of Japan's cities, towns, and villages during the official ban. After 1951 when the ban lapsed, many new neighborhood associations came into existence; by 1956 they were recognized in 98 percent of Japan's municipalities. (Bestor 1990: 75-76)

JICHI-KAI IN GENERAL

Jichi-kai (literally, self-governing association)¹ is just one of a variety of names used for a neighborhood association. It is also called: *chōnai-kai* or *chō-kai* (town association), *shinkō-kai* (association for community development), *gojo-kai* (association for mutual assistance) and other regional varieties. (See: Nakagawa 1980, p. 9). Despite the various names, they all share several characteristics.

a. Automatic Membership

Membership in the neighborhood association is supposed to be voluntary, but according to the statistics, more than 90 percent of the residents are *jichi-kai* members in many communities (Chihō Gyōzaisei Chōsa-kai 1980). Some scholars claim that this high rate results from forced membership in *jichi-kai*, reminiscent of the wartime practice. Susumu Kurasawa, however, suggests that one becomes a *jichi-kai* member automatically once he moves to the community. He does not voluntarily decide whether to join or not, but he and his neighbors accept his membership as a matter of course, thus membership in *jichi-kai* should be regarded as automatic, rather than forced. (Aoi et al. 1987: 5)

b. The Household as the Unit of Membership

In the paragraph above, I intentionally used the male pronoun to indicate a *jichi-kai* member because the *ie*, a household,² is a unit of membership in the *jichi-kai*, and the *ie* is socially represented by a male head. Only the names of household heads appear on membership lists

¹ In the present study I use the term, "*jichi-kai*" only because it is used in Ayabe where I collected the data. The preference given to the term does not mean that it shows the broadest spread in Japan.

² I tentatively use "a household" for *ie*. *Ie* is the Japanese equivalent of house, family, or household. Although *ie* as a category of residence and dwelling may not be problematic, the cultural meanings associated with *ie* prevent its description simply as household or family in the Western sense. For a discussion on *ie*, see: Johnson 1964, Kano 1983, Murakami, Kumon & Sato 1979, Nakane 1967 and Plath 1964.

despite the fact all the household members get involved in various *jichi-kai* activities. The wives are organized under a separate group that carries out its own activities, as are the children and older people.

c. Two Functions: Administrative and Self-Governing

Officially *jichi-kai* has no place in the bureaucratic organization, but *mattan gyōsei no hokan kinō* (the function supplementary to the administration in the lower reaches of the government) (Aoi et al. 1987: 26) is the term used to describe, often negatively, the role played by the *jichi-kai*. For example, it installs and maintains street lights, collects donations for welfare organizations, forms fire brigades and crime prevention groups, and passes on information from the local government. (Nakagawa 1980: 204–205).

There is another essential function that *jichi-kai* performs, a function expressed in its very name, the self-governing of the neighborhood. *Jichi-kai* sponsors diverse projects and provides a variety of services to support community affairs. Further, the *jichi-kai* works as a pressure group, representing demands and requests of the residents. This role is in a sense inherent to its function as a part, though unofficial, of the local administration. Some of the events and services sponsored by *jichi-kai* include: festivals such as *bon-odori* (the mid-summer dance), assistance in birth, marriage and death, the coming-of-age ceremony, and recreational activities such as athletic meetings, social gatherings, *kodomo-kai* (children's associations), *keirō-kai* (elders' associations), joint purchases of daily necessities, cleaning of streets and waterways, and organizing safe traffic campaigns (Ibid.).

d. An Extremely General Purpose

When seen in terms of the kinds of work and services it performs, some of which are listed above, *jichi-kai* is "an inclusive association." It does "everything" concerned with the life of the community. Unlike other associations which are organized to attain a certain purpose, the *jichi-kai* pivots only on a very general purpose such as the amity among

neighbors and the improvement of the community. (Aoi et al. 1987: 4-5)

The *jichi-kai* is also inclusive in terms of its members. Due to automatic membership, the members are so diversified that it is difficult to carry out mutually-agreed-upon purposes. In this regard, *jichi-kai* cannot but settle with an abstract purpose. Nakagawa describes *jichi-kai* as an association with no ideology or no character. (1980: 108-109)

As the last war proves, inherent in such an association without any definite purpose is the danger of political exploitation.

e. A Lack of Upper-Level Organization

Jichi-kai is complete within each locality and does not form a prefectural- or national-level organization. In Ayabe, which will be discussed below, the *jichi-kai* forms leagues by districts, and these leagues are further federated at the city level. There is no upper body of *jichi-kai* beyond that level, however. The fact that the nation-wide system formed by neighborhood associations played a negative role during the war may be one of the stronger factors preventing the formation of a league beyond the locality.

JICHI-KAI IN AYABE CITY³

Ayabe City, Kyoto Prefecture, where I have been doing fieldwork over the past several years, shows a well-organized *jichi-kai* body which covers the entire city. *Ayabe Shimin Shinbun* (*Newspaper for Ayabe Residents*), which mainly reports on local events and people, has featured *jichi-kai* in Ayabe since 1988, introducing 145 out of the 187

³ To explain roughly, Japan's political governing units are *mura*, *machi*, *shi*, and *ken* in the order of smaller to larger. The customary English rendering of *mura* is "village," *machi* "town," *shi* "city," and *ken* "prefecture." In the following text, "village," "town," "city," and "prefecture" are used as the renderings of the Japanese governing units. Though "prefecture" is not problematic to be used for *ken*, the usage of the other three is often different from the one in English which does not stress the administrative aspect of the words. "City," for example, does not necessarily mean an urban area in the following text.

jichi-kai as of August 1991. The following discussion is based on these articles in *Ayabe Shimin Shinbun* and my fieldwork in Ayabe.

Ayabe has a population slightly over 40,000. If categorized, it would be classified as an agricultural area since nearly one half of the entire households are farming-related (Ayabe City: 27). Full-time farmers are, however, getting fewer and fewer in number. People work in offices, factories, and shops, and do the farming before or after work and on holidays.

Ayabe consists of twelve districts that were independent *machi* (town) and *mura* (villages)⁴ before the 1956 merger to form present-day Ayabe City. These districts are divided into a few to several dozens of *jichi-kai*, which are further divided into *kumi*, groups of neighboring households. Some of the smallest *jichi-kai* consist of one *kumi* while a *jichi-kai* in an area with an increasing population may contain as many as thirty-five. City-wide there are 187 *jichi-kai*. All the *jichi-kai* in each district form a district league, and further all the leagues are organized under the City Jichi-kai League.

In an article in *Ayabe Shimin Shinbun*, one reporter describes the *jichi-kai* of Ayabe as follows:

The new comers to Ayabe City are among other things surprised by the active role played by *jichi-kai*. I myself moved in from Fukuchiyama City [which borders Ayabe City] and am impressed by the fact that the *jichi-kai* was organized according to the old districts and some of the district leagues hire their own clerical workers. It is a great contrast with the *jichi-kai* of Fukuchiyama which mainly functions as an administrative sector in the lower reaches of the local government. (May 3, 1990)

Among the local people, *jichi-kai* is something inherent to their community life. In the beginning of my settlement in Ayabe, my

⁴ In fact Ayabe City was one town and twelve villages previously. One of the villages was only partially incorporated into present Ayabe City, so the jointed part is now administratively regarded as belonging to the district which is formally a neighboring village.

landlord, from whom I was renting a house, said to me, "I will tell my neighbors that you are my relative, so you don't have to worry about joining the *jichi-kai*." As mentioned early, one of the *jichi-kai*'s general features is that *ie* is a unit for membership. Since our houses were on the same property, it was an ambivalent situation: It could be one *ie* or two separate ones, depending upon our relationship. The fact that my landlord spontaneously referred to the *jichi-kai* suggests that living in the locality and being a member of the *jichi-kai* go hand in hand, as is said in another article in the *Ayabe Shimin Shinbun*, "In Ayabe, the *jichi-kai* is something inseparable from the local people and naturally accepted like the air..." (July 20, 1989).

When viewed from the administrative side, the Ayabe *jichi-kai* is an efficient top-down communication system. A list of the *jichi-kai* presidents, which are compiled for the use of the officials, includes among the statistical data the numbers of necessary copies of city bulletins for the households and *kumi* in every *jichi-kai*. When bulletins are distributed according to *kumi*, the bulletins are clipped onto *kairan-ban* (notebook-size boards for circulation) and passed from one household to another. The *jichi-kai* is expected to work as a conduit through which the city reaches its citizens.

In a sense, the local government comprehends individual Ayabe residents through the *jichi-kai* system. When I went to the municipal office for the paperwork required to become an official city resident, I was automatically assigned to one of the *kumi* in the Ōshima-chō Jichi-kai. This arrangement was made mostly for the sake of convenience in collecting night soil. As far as the city was concerned, I was a member of the Ōshima-chō Jichi-kai, but in the actual *jichi-kai* activities I was not counted because of the reason mentioned early.

In the same manner the collection of taxes is entrusted to the *jichi-kai*. Because its officials easily find the members' financial status, new comers to the city tend to oppose this arrangement. They are given optional ways to pay their taxes. One city official comments that the system of tax collection through *jichi-kai* is well-established among the

citizens and the city has no plan to change this system (*Ayabe Shimin Shinbun*, July 21, 1990). The handling charge and commission the *jichi-kai* receives from the city make up a large portion of its budget.

The *jichi-kai* contributes to the local government with another function. In a 1989 interview article of *Ayabe Shimin Shinbun*, the then president of the City Jichi-kai League pointed out that the most important role of *jichi-kai* is to prepare the community to cooperate with projects carried out by the city (July 20, 1989). The *jichi-kai* officials have to have a good understanding of funding and the plans that are explained to them by city officials in charge. "A semi-official local government," a term which Bestor uses to describe one aspect of a neighborhood association in Tokyo (1985: 127) is also applicable to the Ayabe *jichi-kai*.

Jichi-kai also demand that the city take measures necessary to resolve or improve existing problems that otherwise might be overlooked. The Kuri-machi Jichi-kai, for example, requested the widening of a prefectural road that runs through its neighborhood. The road is so narrow at the crossing with another prefectural road that cars facing each other cannot pass. The *jichi-kai* is also concerned with the safety of children who take that road to go to school. In July 1990 the land survey by the city started, and the residents are well satisfied even though they expect some more difficulties to overcome such as the removal of the houses along the road. (*Ayabe Shimin Shinbun*, July 18, 1990)

Jichi-kai sometimes does for the benefit of its members more than a pressure group. The Nakasuji District League which consists of 1,538 residents in eight *jichi-kai* (as of 1989) was major force in rebuilding the district elementary school on a new lot. Literally the Nakasuji District League initiated its plans and the local government followed.

The noise from the road which ran in front of the school was beyond tolerance, and an increase of the school children was also expected. The Jichi-kai League resolved to build a school building on a new site while the local government claiming a lack of funds insisted on the renovation

of the building. In 1968 the League purchased a land for a new school to be built. After a few years of negotiations between the Nakasuji Jichi-kai League and the city, the ownership of the land was transferred to the latter, and all the expenses were reimbursed to the League. The construction work for a school building on the new site started in 1975, and was completed five years later. The Jichi-kai League also played a major role in providing necessary equipment to the new school building.⁵ (Nakasuji Kōmin-kan Shiryō Iin-kai 1987: 48-89)

As far as the featured articles in *Ayabe Shimin Shinbun* are concerned, “*matomari no yosa* (good teamwork),” “*danketsu* (solidarity),” “*rentai* (fraternity),” and “*fureai* (communion through personal contact)” are most often used to describe the various neighborhood associations. The fact that almost all of the 145 neighborhood associations (which appeared in the newspaper up to August 1991) stress the above features indicates that they are the qualities people expect of neighborhood associations.

In order to enhance these qualities which all emphasizes spiritual unity, the *jichi-kai* in Ayabe sponsor various recreational events. Among them, summer festivals and athletic meetings are most conspicuous with the participation of a large number of people. The summer festivals are held around *bon* in mid-August when the dead are believed to return to their homes in this world. The festivals are, however, centered on secular enjoyment: In a festival sponsored by the Toriino Jichi-kai, food and soft-drink stalls and a treasure-hunting game entertained the crowd (*Ayabe Shimin Shinbun*, Aug. 16, 1990). A singing contest is also a favorite entertainment in summer festivals. The athletic meetings are held either in spring or fall. The Aono-chō Jichi-kai used to sponsor softball games, but a sports day was newly planned so that the residents of all age levels could take part. Children as well as

⁵ When the national school system was established in 1872, the government depended heavily on the neighborhood associations founding and maintaining schools (Aoi et al. 1987: 22-23). Thus, the initiative taken by the Nakasuji Jichi-kai League is not an exceptional case, but rather based on a traditional practice.

adults in Aono-chō enjoyed the tug-of-war and other games. (Ibid., Sept. 19, 1989)

The articles concerned with *jichi-kai* in *Ayabe Shimin Shinbun* and my fieldwork data reveal that religious affairs weigh heavily in *jichi-kai* activities. *Miya sōdai* (a representative for the congregation of a Shinto shrine) and *tera sōdai* (a representative for the congregation of a Buddhist temple) are listed as officials in many *jichi-kai*. Originally Japanese villages were formed with a guardian deity at the core of the solidarity among the villagers (Akata 1984: 83). In Ayabe, this unifying religious function is still in effect at the *jichi-kai* level. The Yūhi-ga-oka Jichi-kai presents a good case. It was organized twenty-five years ago in a newly developed residential area, and of course did not have their guardian deity like other communities with a long history. In 1976 a wife of a former *jichi-kai* president dedicated in accordance with her husband's will an image of a *jizō* (a tutorial deity for children) for Yūhi-ga-oka. The *jichi-kai* collected donations from the residents and built a shrine for this *jizō*. It was named *Zenrin Jizō-son*, the *jizō* for a friendly neighborhood. Stressing the cooperative efforts made by the members to make available their own guardian deity, the record of the Yūhi-ga-oka Jichi-kai says, "This *jizō* is a spiritual symbol of the development of our new community." (Yūhi-ga-oka 10-nen-shi Henshū linkai 1982: 55)

The religious duties of *jichi-kai* are expanding against a general trend of secularizaion. Besides their guardian deity, the Takatsuki Jichi-kai brought Hayatake Shrine under its care several years ago. The Shrine was formerly dedicated to the guardian deity of the Ueba family. Mr. Ueba still takes part as a priest in the annual rite held in early February, but the fall festival in October is considered as a community affair. The *jichi-kai* cleans the shrine and surrounding area, and puts up banners around the Shrine. There are some other cases reported that neglected deities came under the care and attention of *jichi-kai*. (e.g. *Ayabe Shimin Shinbun*, Aug. 28, 1989)

JICHI-KAI AS THE INSTITUTIONAL REALIZATION OF CHIEN

The *jichi-kai* in Ayabe is concerned with every aspect of the peoples' life to the extent that it is exactly like "the air." The residents are not continuously conscious of its existence, and yet life without it is beyond imagination. One is born into the web of *jichi-kai*, and grows up without really giving a thought to it. In the concluding part, I would like to examine the cultural basis of this pervasive institution, and relate it to the concept of *chien*.

In her 1970 work, Chie Nakane calls Japanese society "frame-oriented." Presenting two contrasting concepts, "the attribute-oriented society" and "the frame-oriented society," Nakane argues that the former society organizes individuals according to the common attributes. They are attained either by birth, i.e., membership to a kin group, or have accomplished in the later stages of life, i.e., occupation; while the latter society organizes people into groups with heterogeneous attributes. Nakane explains that:

[A] frame may be a locality, an institution or particular relationship which binds a set of individuals into one group: in all cases it indicates a criterion which sets a boundary and gives a common basis to a set of individuals who are located or involved in it (Ibid.: 1).

The profiles of *jichi-kai* presented above are in accord with Nakane's analysis of Japanese society: *Jichi-kai* is a frame set by a territorial criterion. The only necessary qualification for membership is to be a resident of a certain area. The individual peculiarities of the resident such as occupation, political belief, religion, and the like do not matter.

I would like to take the position that at the base of this territorial framework is *chien*, which literally means a relationship founded upon residence in the same locality, but which is, at the same time, the cultural value of the Japanese people. *Jichi-kai* is one of institutionalized forms of *chien*. The universality of *jichi-kai* in the Japanese society suggests that *chien* is deeply embedded in Japanese mind.

Chien is one of the key concepts for understanding Japanese society;

it works on other facets of the society than *jichi-kai*. The discrimination against *buraku* shows an intriguing correspondence with this territorial concept. The word, *buraku*, signifies a hamlet in a neutral sense, but is often used with prejudice to refer to a group of socially discriminated people and their communities. Who is a *buraku-min* (person) largely depends on one's family genealogy. If one moves into *buraku* from *ippan chiiki* (a regular community), however, after an certain period of residency he/she comes to be regarded as a *buraku-min*.⁶ (Ishimoto 1991: 40-41) Though it is generally believed that a *buraku-min* status depends on one's blood, *buraku* is also a *chien*-related social category.

Chien is one of the basic Japanese cultural values with which the Japanese people conceptualize and categorize their world. This value of *chien* lies at the basis of various institutions such as the *jichi-kai*, and its influence can be perceived on many aspects of the society.

CHARACTER LIST

<i>Bon & Bon-odori</i>	盆, 盆踊り
<i>Buraku & Buraku-min</i>	部落, 部落民
<i>Chien</i>	地縁
<i>Chō-kai</i>	町会
<i>Chōnai-kai</i>	町内会
<i>Danketsu</i>	団結
<i>Fureai</i>	触れ合い
<i>Gojo-kai</i>	互助会
<i>Ie</i>	家
<i>Ippan chiiki</i>	一般地域
<i>Jizō</i>	地藏
<i>Kairan-ban</i>	回覧板
<i>Keirō-kai</i>	敬老会

⁶ In the opposite direction, moving out of *buraku* and settling in *ippan chiiki* does not, however, cancel one's *buraku-min* status. Without hiding where he/she is originally from, or even where his/her parents came from, the stigma wouldn't go away. The question what makes one a *buraku-min* requires a separate inquiry.

<i>Ken</i>	県
<i>Kodomo-kai</i>	子供会
<i>Kumi</i>	組
<i>Machi</i>	町
<i>Mattan gyōsei no hokan kinō</i>	末端行政の補完機能
<i>Matomari no yosa</i>	まとまりの良さ
<i>Minsei iin</i>	民生委員
<i>Miya sōdai</i>	宮総代
<i>Mura</i>	村
<i>Rentai</i>	連帯
<i>Shi</i>	市
<i>Shinkō-kai</i>	振興会
<i>Taisei Yokusan-kai</i>	大政翼賛会
<i>Tera-sōdai</i>	寺総代
<i>Tonari-gumi</i>	隣組
<i>Zenrin Jizō-son</i>	善隣地蔵尊

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